

The pastoral relations committee supports and maintains an open relationship between the ordained minister (and sometimes other staff) and members of the congregation. It helps the pastor and members of the church share ideas, hopes, dreams and interpretations of mission. It lets the pastor know what people in the church are thinking. It gives a framework for dealing with conflict creatively. The functions of a pastoral relations committee may also be carried out by deacons, elders or the governing board.

Common Practices

In every church there is someone who undertakes support of the relationship between the pastor and the congregation. Sometimes individuals feel the need and do their best without any official position. Many churches assign the functions of a pastoral relations committee to the deacons, elders, spiritual council, personnel committee or governing board, or share the functions among them.

When a new pastor is called, some people who serve on the search committee usually continue on the pastoral relations committee for at least a year.

Responsibilities

The pastoral relations committee should meet regularly, perhaps quarterly, always with the pastor

present. You will also need to be prepared to meet on call when the committee or the pastor feels the need to talk together. You will be responsible for:

- Defining your responsibilities.
- Establishing clear and workable directions, goals and plans of actions.
- Helping the congregation understand and value your committee's task.
- Clarifying the pastor's position description and mutual expectations about what the pastor is to do and what has priority. If the pastor has been called without a position description, you'll need to see that one is developed so that expectations are clear. (Consult the Call Agreement to help do this.)
- Periodically clarifying and renegotiating expectations.
- Supporting the pastor's ministry beyond the local church in the community and denomination.
- Encouraging the pastor to participate in continuing education programs and in planning a sabbatical that builds on strengths and addresses weaknesses.
- Acting within an atmosphere of confidentiality.
- Demonstrating concern and understanding for the pastor's financial needs. You may need to advocate for adequate financial support when the budget is being considered.
- Demonstrating concern and support for the pastor's family.

- Encouraging the pastor to plan time for recreation, exercise, relaxation, family and solitude.
- Working for improved communication, interpretation and understanding between the congregation and the pastor.
- Defining areas of potential conflict between the pastor's ministry and that of the congregation and assisting in developing alternative solutions and possibilities for avoiding destructive conflict.
- Openly and honestly communicating feelings and reactions of church members to the pastor.
- Providing an opportunity for the pastor to reflect in confidence about personal concerns, hopes, ambitions and frustrations.
- Planning celebrations of personal and professional milestones.
- Being alert to the pastor's concerns between meetings.
- Participating in an annual evaluation of the work of the pastor and assisting the pastor in sharing her or his evaluation of the state of the church.
- Evaluating the relationship between the pastor and the congregation.
- Keeping minutes of meetings and drawing learnings from them periodically.
- Listening to individuals or groups in the church regarding the relationship between the pastor and congregation.

- Calling on conference or association staff to assist in clarification or mediation.
- Advocating a written personnel policy with provisions for salary and other monetary benefits, continuing education, vacation, holidays and sick leave.
- Being familiar with the church's personnel policy.
- Having a clearly defined relationship with the personnel committee, if there is one.

Skills and Attributes Needed

- Maturity.
- Ability to see both sides of a situation.
- Ability to deal with conflict.
- Trustworthiness.
- Visibility in the congregation.
- Availability for listening to church members.
- Confidentiality.
- Ability to set clear boundaries with church members so that inappropriate secret-keeping is not an expectation.

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Listen to what church members are saying about programs, ideas and the pastor.

- Use **The Pastoral Relations Committee**, a booklet from Parish Life and Leadership. This booklet will help a local church start a pastoral relations committee or strengthen an existing one. Download from www.ucc.org/ministries
- Read **The Pastor and the People: Building a New Partnership for Effective Ministry** by Lyle Schaller, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), which includes suggestions for position descriptions and surfacing expectations.
- Use **Completing the Circle**, an Alban Institute book about pastoral evaluation, written by a UCC area minister. Order from United Church of Christ Resources, 800 537-3394.
- Ask your conference for guidelines on pastors' salaries.
- Have the chairperson and pastor get together to discuss issues to be brought to the meeting.
- Meet regularly so that you establish an open relationship and are able to speak comfortably with one another.
- Rotate the membership of the committee, so that there will be continuity of those familiar with the committee's work.
- Meet in a setting where you won't be interrupted or overheard.

Issues Facing the Church

- One of the hardest jobs of a pastoral relations committee is getting started. Sometimes it seems difficult to be honest without being threatening or intimidating. How do you think a committee and pastor could begin to work together to strengthen the relationship between pastor and congregation?
- The pastoral relations committee is not a legislative body that can vote on behalf of the church. How can the committee secure approval for its recommendations?
- The work of the pastoral relations committee depends, in part, on the church's having a written personnel policy and a position description and evaluation procedures for each staff member. How does a pastoral relations committee proceed if none exists?

Questions

- What should the committee be communicating to the congregation?
- Who should be members of this committee and how should they be selected? How much influence should the pastor have in their selection?

- If your church does not have a pastoral relations committee, what committees have the functions of this committee? What would be the advantages of establishing this committee?
- If you wanted to set up a pastoral relations committee, what are five questions to begin discussion?
- Are there any responsibilities of a pastoral relations committee that need special work in your church now? How can you deal with them?